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SUBJECT: SUDAN HAS MUTED REACTION TO POPE'S REMARKS, SAYS NEW VATICAN FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: VATICAN 198

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES CAMERON HUME; REASON: SECTIONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

**¶1.** (C) Sudan's reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's controversial remarks on Islam has been muted, Papal Nuncio to Sudan--and the Vatican's new Secretary for Relations with States--Dominique Mamberti told CDA Hume on September 26. Mamberti had returned from Rome on September 16, and promptly called on officials at the Foreign Ministry to discuss his departure; the Pope's September 12 Regensburg speech did not come up at all. Only a few hours later, however, Minister of Religious Guidance and Endowments Azhar al Tigani summoned Mamberti to deliver a formal protest--the first time in Mamberti's four years in Sudan that he had ever met the Minister, who oversees both Islamic endowments (waqaf) and church building permits. The two had a pleasant exchange, Mamberti said, though local media nevertheless depicted the meeting as confrontational.

**¶2.** (U) Most other local press reports about the Pope's reports have been mild, with the independent Arabic language Al-Sudani publishing a September 20 editorial calling on Muslims "to promote a better image of Islam than the one generally conveyed to many people around the world...Instead of staging demonstrations that end in acts of vandalism, we should invite the Pope to a lecture prepared by a senior Muslim scholar, refuting arguments against Islam." A commentary in Al-Sahafa also suggested that "Your lecture, dear Father, should have focused on combining the efforts of all religions to combat the challenges faced by all faiths today, in a modern world that is increasingly moving away from religion. Instead of focusing on the Crusades and wars between civilizations, it would be wiser to focus on dialogue between various religious groups." One columnist did criticize the Pope for being "very ignorant of Islam," and called on Sudan to break relations with the Holy See.

**¶3.** (C) There have been no incidents against Catholics in Sudan. Protests planned for last week in Khartoum were rained out, though a few banners were put up around mosques in the capital on September 22, the international "day of rage." There was also a small protest outside the Catholic church in El Fasher, North Darfur, according to Mamberti, though this was likely driven more by official opposition to international intervention in Darfur than to real religious sentiment.

**¶4.** (C) Comment: Mamberti expects to take up his new duties in Rome in two weeks, and seems to be looking forward to the change. His four years in Sudan seem to have taught him the value of patience--he recounted the long negotiations leading up to the North-South Comprehensive Peace Agreement--but also made him something of an optimist, at least in the long term. Though he speaks no Arabic, his childhood in Morocco and his

diplomatic service in Algiers, Beirut, New York, and Khartoum  
should serve him well as the Vatican attempts to engage the  
Islamic world. Patience and optimism should help, too.

HUME